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ABSTRACT

Magic motivates students to talk, and stimulates the affective domain. While watching magic, many people imagine how the effect is accomplished or how they might perform the trick if they were performing. This can be extended into an English lesson by using phrases such as, "If I were a magician, I could..." Total physical response activities take on a new meaning when students participate in a short magical effect. For teachers, the trick is to connect a magical theme with a lesson objective, and for the magic trick to be effective with an ESL lesson, the lesson should be limited to one special word and one concept, serving as a vehicle to reinforce vocabulary. Magic can also be incorporated into reading lessons, since it is a popular theme for children's books. Students like to repeat the magic words as the teacher reads the story, and later the students can retell the story, dictate chart stories, or make experience charts as a class. Another way to incorporate magic into a reading lesson is to write directions for a magic trick on a chart, and during any magic performance, the magician repeats the same series of commands. Other suggestions for potential use of magic in classroom lessons involve colors, safety measures, shapes, counting, math, spelling, topology, size comparisons, and spatial positions. Many easy magic tricks are available in children's magic books, and children's math books include many optical illusions that make good discussion topics. It is important to use imagination, practice the magic, keep it simple, and have fun. (MSE)

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PULLING WORDS OUT OF A HAT: MAGIC IN ESL LESSONS

by
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Teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) are frequently seen carting loads of realia into their classrooms. Why not carry a few tricks up your sleeve as well?

Magic motivates students to talk, and stimulates the affective domain of the brain. Students acquire English with their imagination as well as with their eyes, ears, and hands. While watching magic, many people imagine how the effect is accomplished, or how they might perform the trick IF they were performing. This can be extended into an English lesson by using phrases such as, "If I were a magician, I could...." A student could describe the sequence of events in a magic routine. Magic shows are often on television using famous performers such as Doug Henning, David Copperfield, and Mark Wilson. Many students have seen magic acts in their own country. The teacher can bring out these experiences in writing lessons using experience charts and student-dictated stories. Students enjoy remembering magic tricks. Magic is a useful way to encourage students to remember more vocabulary.

"Total Physical Response" (1) activities take on new meaning when students participate in a short "magical" effect. Total Physical Response is effective because students must react physically to a spoken command. When students follow the spoken direction of the magician, they can acquire English words as well as participate in learning a magical illusion. Students' anxiety about learning English is refocussed into a fun activity of which English is an integral part.

For teachers, the "trick" is to connect a magical theme with a lesson objective, such as social studies, vocabulary, or mathematical concepts. Teachers can take advantage of the student's attraction to reinforce vocabulary. (2) Certain vocabulary words, such as space prepositions are easily illustrated with magic. Magic tricks using numbers have existed for centuries. Most small objects that can be easily manipulated in the hands can be adapted to a magic trick.

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For a magic trick to be successful with an ESL lesson, the lesson should be limited to using ONE special word, and one concept. In this way, the magic trick serves as a vehicle for reinforcing the vocabulary in the students' minds. The more repetition of the command or vocabulary, the more firmly it is established in the students' memories.

Magic can also be incorporated into reading lessons. Magic is a popular theme for children's books. Students like to repeat the "magic words" as the teacher reads the story (3,4). Later, the students can retell the story in sequence, and dictate chart stories or make experience charts with the entire class supplying the vocabulary.

Another way to include magic in a reading lesson is to write the directions for a magic trick on a chart. During any magic performance, the magician repeats the same series of commands.

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After the vocabulary is taught, students can practice the trick. Some examples of this can be found in Live Action English (5). Vocabulary used in magic is very specific and is repeated often for effect. Cards are shuffled, cut and dealt; rope is tied, twisted, and cut; coins are held, counted, and spent. The most effective magical effects for ESL are tricks where the student must interact with the performer. The more often the command is repeated to the student, the greater the reinforcement of vocabulary (6). Illusions that are meant to be seen but not touched are nice, but are not as effective for teaching English.

Children benefit most from illusions that are "hands on," and that can be examined and discussed later. Some students may want to perform the illusion for a classmate at a later time. Because magic vocabulary is limited, it is possible for students to memorize a short routine.

Common commands used repeatedly in magic include:
"Watch."
"Pick a card, show it to your friends, and memorize it."
"Put it back."
"Let me find your card."
"Shuffle/cut/return the card."
"Take two rings, balls, boxes..."
"Put your hand over/under/through..."
"Count the..."
"Tie a knot."
"Blow on it."
"Which hand?"
"Count them."

The illusions may change, but not the commands to the participants. Equally amazing, ESL students have their own set of magic-related vocabulary that no one ever taught them. The students are often so motivated by magic that they can overcome shyness in order to participate. Because the magician does most of the talking, the student need only respond with a one word answer. This lowers the students affective filter; thus, the student is able to concentrate more on what the teacher is doing than on the student's own response.

Magic in ESL lessons generates expressions such as:
"Can we playing magic?"
"I magic for you."
"I can see your hands."
"Do it again."
"Let me do it."

Magic can be used to teach many different concepts. Some suggestions are:

COLORS -- Many tricks that can be performed with cards can also be performed with color cards that are blank on the reverse side. Students can select a color, memorize it, and show it to their friends. Colors can be produced in many ways using crayons, colored papers, and scarves. Many magical effects which use scarves involve color changing. One colored scarf can be put into a tube, then changed to a different color as it is pulled from the tube (7). Some magicians perform routines with thimbles that change colors (8).

In a classroom situation, it is recommended that the teacher work with simple props that require minimal advance preparation. Many different classroom materials can be used to teach color in a magical way without too much adaptation. With some practice, small crayons may be "palmed" by holding them under the thumb and "vanished" only to reappear in a different location. Some props, such as color-changing tubes, may be made from construction paper.

SAFETY -- Many magic routines about safety for children usually use a piece of chalk and a blackboard. When using "Chalk Talks," (9) the teacher draws a small part of a picture, such as a circle, and develops it into a larger picture during a narration on safety. A circle can be changed into a clock while describing, "it's time for safety." As the speaker develops the lesson, shapes on the board can be modified to illustrate the main concept.

SHAPES -- Magical properties have long been associated with basic shapes: squares, circles, triangles, and pentagons. Shape "effects" can be shown with small sponges. These can be easily held and manipulated by hand. Small sponge balls can be substituted for square or hexagonal sponges. Some sponges are hollow inside. A cube or a bunny can be turned inside out to form a ball, and later turned inside-out again to reveal its original shape (10,11).

COUNTING -- Many magic card tricks can be used easily with flash cards and playing cards. The old adage, "Pick a card, show it to your friends, and memorize it" can be used to reinforce new vocabulary as well as teach numbers. Use balls, cards, and silks to demonstrate these effects. Use counting as an exercise by having the student count the shapes on a card with numbers. It is suggested that the teacher use standard flash cards, or make cards out of paper rather than use playing cards. For the number cards, use a small stamp, such as a happy face, so the student can combine counting with vocabulary. For example, a student might select a card with five butterflies. This adds interest, vocabulary, and repetition. Some card tricks are mathematical in nature, and non-magicians can find success with them while adapting a story appropriate to the lesson.

MATH -- Magic can be applied to teaching math vocabulary. Objects can "appear," which can teach the concept of addition, and "disappear" for subtraction. Albert Goshman (12, 13) developed a sponge ball routine which uses simple counting. The magician holds one sponge ball, the child holds one sponge ball.

The magician then touches the child's hand. The child opens the hand to find two sponge balls! Next, the magician puts two sponge balls in the child's hand, touches the child's hand again, the child opens the hand, and there are three sponge balls! When the child opens the hand the last time, a giant foam numeral of four is found. Older students can enjoy the same routine and "predict" the outcome using the future tense. Numbers made from sponges can teach different colors and denominations. These can be purchased at a teacher's supply store.

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SPELLING -- Some card tricks can be used to spell the name of the chosen card as the magician tries to produce it. This can be adapted to common vocabulary items. Instead of spelling f-o-u-r as the cards are counted out, the teacher can spell f-o-r-k to produce a picture of a fork or other vocabulary item (14).

TOPOLOGY -- Topology is a math concept which relates to lines and closed and open curves in two and three dimensions. Many magic tricks using this appear in students' books because the illusion is visual. Often, the student must trace the lines with a ruler or finger and follow it to figure out the trick. Rope and toothpick tricks can be performed simultaneously by several children following the teacher's directions. These tricks are most easily accessible in children's magazines and puzzle books. Another source can be the "Games" section in Omni Magazine (15).

SIZE COMPARISONS -- A Los Angeles magician, Tom Ogden, uses many small toys for use in his magic illusions. In one of his routines, Mr. Ogden puts one tiny tennis shoe in his hand and one in his pocket. Suddenly, all the little tennis shoes are transformed into a GIANT tennis shoe. This is one way to adopt a routine to teach the concepts of small and large, little and big. Mr. Ogden has adapted this routine and countless variations of it to many common objects that can be bought as miniatures in toy stores (16).

SPACE POSITIONS -- Magic can be used on an impromptu basis to demonstrate spatial positions. Small objects can be hidden by holding them between the thumb and the palm of the hand. The object can be grasped by the thumb and moved into view. Using this technique, small toys, balls, papers, etc. can "appear" over a box or under it, in any position that is appropriate for the lesson. Small balls or coins can be produced "out" of a student's ear or from the teacher's mouth (for comic relief). The classic "cups and balls" routine can be used to teach right, left, and middle. Flash cards can be made to show a rabbit in various positions around a hat. Students can draw their own magical pictures, labelling four or five positions where objects "appear."

Many easy magic tricks are available in children's magic books. Some of these tricks include many effects that are "hands on" where several people can participate at one time. Often, mathematical effects can be found in student math texts in the "Challenge" section at the end of the chapters or in the magic section of the children's library.

Children's math books include many optical illusions that make excellent discussion topics. Because perceptions vary widely, optical illusions can also be used in notional lessons using the concept of space. Examples might include designs by James Escher and other artists specializing in visual illusions (17). Most importantly, ESL students discover that they can read these books because the illustrations make the text comprehensible. Thus, ESL students are encouraged to read for enjoyment.

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In order to keep the surprise and mystery of your magic trick intact, I suggest that the props not be the "magic kit" kind which may be freely available in stores to the students. If you use un-gimmicked props, the students can examine them later.

The list of ideas is only limited by your imagination and resourcefulness. Some illustrations are shown on the illustration sheet attached.

REMEMBER: PRACTICE YOUR MAGIC, KEEP IT SIMPLE, AND HAVE FUN!

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